

Turkish protests at Pope's visit

Thousands of Muslims have taken part in a protest in Istanbul against the Pope's forthcoming visit to Turkey.

The crowds booed - and shouted slogans such as "Don't come Pope" - as pictures of Benedict XVI were shown on a giant screen in a square in the city suburbs.

The Pope sparked outrage across the Muslim world in September, when he quoted a 14th-Century Christian emperor who criticised the Prophet Muhammad.

His visit, which begins on Tuesday, will be his first to a Muslim country.

Sunday's protest was organised by the Islamic Felicity Party, a small group that is not represented in the Turkish parliament.

A huge poster on the square showed pictures of a crusader and of violence in the Middle East.

"Who brought evil and inhumanity?" the poster asked, addressing the Pope. "Now don't come here, unless you apologise."

Police said more than 25,000 protesters had joined the demonstration, which was monitored by hundreds of security officers, including riot police.

Symbolic visit

In Rome, the Pope sent a greeting to the Turkish people in which he offered sincere friendship and praised Turkish history and culture.

We hope this visit will help eliminate misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians

Abdullah Gul
Turkey's foreign minister

He is due to visit Istanbul's Blue Mosque, in what correspondents say will be a

highly symbolic occasion. It will be his first visit to a mosque since becoming pontiff in 2005.

While in Turkey, the Pope will meet the country's small Catholic community, as well as Orthodox Christians and Muslim clerics.

Speaking at a news conference, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul tried to play down the controversy.

"We hope this visit will help eliminate misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians," Mr Gul said. "The Pope's message will be very important."

Before the protests, a senior Felicity Party official, Osman Yumakogullari, told AFP news agency: "We have infinite respect for all religions and their representatives, but we cannot remain silent in the face of declarations that go against our faith."

In his September speech, the Pope quoted Emperor Manuel II Paleologos of the Byzantine Empire, who said Muhammad had brought only "evil and inhuman" things.

The Pope stressed that these were not his own words and later expressed regret for any offence his words caused.

However many Muslim leaders have been demanding an unequivocal apology.

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